

Media | Art | Education

Working on and with *Eigensinn*

Giacco Schiesser

The Department <Media & Art> at the University of Art and Design Zurich

In 2002, as part of the restructuring of the University of Art and Design Zurich (*Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst Zürich*, HGKZ) that had been underway since 1997, the Departments of Film/Video, Photography, and New Media as well as the Fine Arts program were merged together into the Department of Media & Art, in which approximately 300 full-time students are currently enrolled. Since early 2002, the department has been going about opening up the previously quite self-contained curricula of the individual programs and working out an educational concept that maintains the quality of the training provided heretofore—for example, the Departments of Film and Photography here in Zurich are the only ones of their kind in Switzerland and the Department of New Media's focus is unique in Europe—and that, at the same time, takes into account changed circumstances with respect to the role of information, networks and knowledge in modern society. The aim has been to offer students an attractive, highly self-determined course of study that can be pursued either vertically within one of the majors or laterally in interdisciplinary fashion.

Guiding Precepts or *On Eigensinn as Artistic Productive Force*

Three fundamental precepts—unique in Europe, it may well be said—guide the work on this concept, a process that will be completed in early 2004:¹

1. Training in individual and collective *media authorship*
2. Working on and with the *Eigensinn* (approx.: willful obstinacy) of film, photography, computers / networks and the fine arts as media
3. *Art as process, art as method*

“Training in individual and collective media authorship” means that students ought to develop and pursue their own themes, interests and issues, which they are then to execute in a way that is appropriate to the medium in which they are working. An advantage of the concept of media authorship is that it avoids establishing a fruitless distinction between artistic and applied works. Whether students go on to careers as artists or in private enterprise—either as employees or entrepreneurs—is their decision. The key factor here is that students do not assume the role of an operator who executes prescribed assignments; rather, they act as producers who, with independence and media competence, process content and realize it as a finished project or product. Furthermore, it is highly desirable for all of us to get, besides art, for example, other photographs custom-tailored to the potential of their media in magazines and advertisements, other films on TV, or other computer games that go against the grain and get away from conventional uses of media.

“Working on and with the *Eigensinn* (willful obstinacy) of computers and networks as media” proceeds under the assumption that computers and networks have their own individually specific potentials, structures and limitations. You are all familiar with works of literature, the fine arts, photography, music, film and video. From your everyday experience—whether as specialists or laymen—you are aware that each one of these media has something about it that is essentially its own. What can be written in literature is something different than what can be shown on film. What a photograph captures differs from what a piece of music expresses. All these media possess different possibilities and limitations that make them unique and inimitable by any other. With the term *Eigensinn* of a medium,” I attempt to capture this complex differentiation. And for each of these media, there is a series of specific aesthetics that have emerged over the course of centuries in some cases, over several decades in others. In the cinema, for instance, from the silent film aesthetic of artists like George Méliès to the first French avant-garde works to contemporary splatter movies; in literature, from the *Entwicklungsroman* to Dadaism and the automatic style of writing of the surrealists all the way to current, collectively authored Internet literature; and in music, from Italian opera to twelve-tone music and Jazz to Hip-Hop and ambient, to cite just a few examples.

Without working on and with this *Eigensinn*, it is impossible to attain media authorship that exhibits originality, radicality and promise.

“Art as process, art as method,” a concept that can be traced back to Russian formalist Viktor Shklovski, refers to the fact that it is only by means of project-oriented education and ongoing, astute and media-customized artistic experimentation—the process of incessantly going deeper into a subject, of going against the grain and of subverting commonplace uses of media—that new and innovative artistic and design projects, and thus new possibilities of perception and insight, can be conceived, executed and experienced.

A Media and Art Education in Keeping with the Times

Willful obstinacy (*Eigensinnigkeit*) and artistic acumen (*Scharfsinnigkeit*) in both individual and collective media authorship / appropriate use of media / art as a process—I consider these the strategic elements in a model of a media and art education that is in keeping with the times.

In addition, an education that is conceived in terms of the future but one that also includes, takes seriously and works through experience with tradition will provide students with latitude for experimentation in which, curiously, radically and uncompromisingly, the individual and collective work of creative media authorship done by students on interests, content and topics of their own choosing or on assigned projects as well as their work on and with *Eigensinn* with a whole spectrum of individual and hybrid media is demanded and encouraged.

Moreover, a media education today must at the same time be transmedial, meaning that students are put in a position to be able to work both in and with a particular medium as well as to learn to think in terms of and work at its interface with other media. Authorship in a media- and technology-based age—precisely what our post-industrial epoch constitutes—means not only individual or collective authorship in which everyone brings his/her own specific areas of competence to bear but also collaborative authorship in which everyone is capable of setting up their own linkages between their specific fields of competence and those of others and, in doing so, repeatedly emerge as having been themselves thoroughly transformed by this process. Besides the development of social, communicative and, to an increasing extent, analytical skills, however, this also presupposes profound

insights into one's own medium as well as the media of others. The meaning of an education that includes both in-depth work in one medium and transdisciplinary work in others—and one that must necessarily go beyond that which is offered by a university of media and art—is, in my opinion, enabling art students to find a way that is in keeping with the times, or, as is increasingly called for in this Information Society, to become flexible and multi-dimensional media authors who, as individuals and as team members, are capable of assuming responsibility for content, conception, realization, the production process and budgeting in confident, masterly fashion.

If it is true that any new medium has a double impact on old media, in that it forces them into a new conception of their possibilities under new circumstances and, at the same time, transforms them as well, then one of the essential challenges to and opportunities of a media and art education at art universities is also—and perhaps even essentially—to enable and encourage hybrid or cross-over works of art such as interactive audio installations, video essays, media architecture, transmedial interfaces, interfaces in urban spaces, DJ events, digital poetry, new aesthetics of the performative, SMS visuals for clubs, parties, intercity streams from DJ events, Internet TV, cultural software, radio concerts for cell phones or many, many other possibilities. Transmedial or hybrid art demands—and over the intermediate term, this is the central challenge for art education—that we work in, impart and utilize a whole series of complex specialized fields like neurophysiology, cognitive sciences, architecture, nanotechnology, theories of informatics, aesthetics, cognition and perception, as well as the life sciences that are not taught at a single university but rather at a number of different institutions. A key reason for this is the fact that, whereas the technology-based nature of the media has indeed been constantly increasing since the invention of photography, this process has taken a quantum leap as a result of digitization. Thus, the dispositive has also changed fundamentally and dramatically for the arts as well. In a detailed and comprehensive work published a number of years ago, Hans-Peter Schwarz traced the eventful history of the various arts and technology since the 18th century and established the indisputable significance of technology for media art now and in the future. The linkage of art, technology and science—which, in the Renaissance, became a matter taken completely for granted during a short historical epoch—will, without a doubt, be a precondition for art and media work in the future and thus for an adequate education.

1 Due to space constraints, my remarks here can only briefly touch on the social framework conditions, content, objectives and guiding principles of the education that the Department of Media and Art will provide in the future. For a more detailed and comprehensive elaboration, see: Giaco Schiesser: *Medien | Kunst | Ausbildung. Über den Eigensinn als künstlerische Produktivkraft.* (Media | Art | Education. On Eigensinn as a Force in Artistic Production.) In: *Schnittstellen*. Edited by Sigrid Schade, Thomas Sieber, and Georg Christoph Tholen. (Basler Beiträge zur Medienwissenschaft. Vol. 1). Basel: Schwabe 2004.